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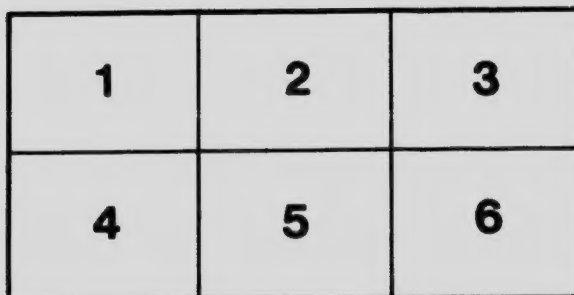
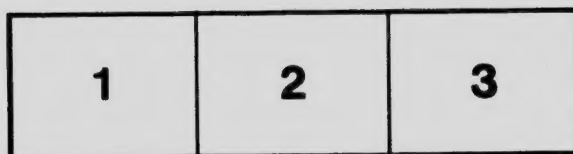
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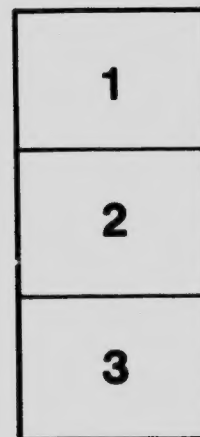
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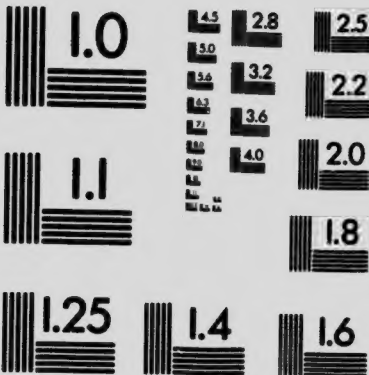
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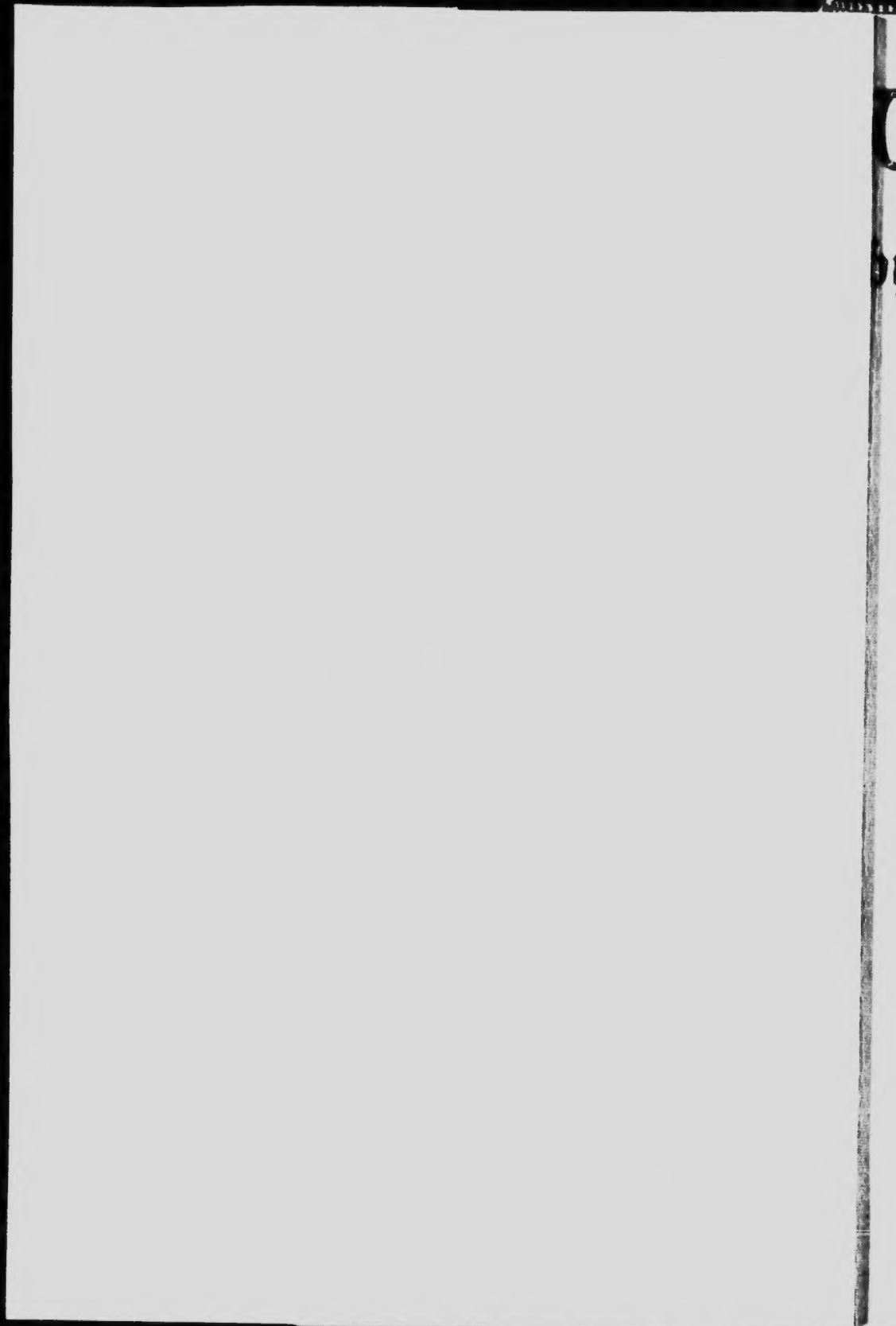
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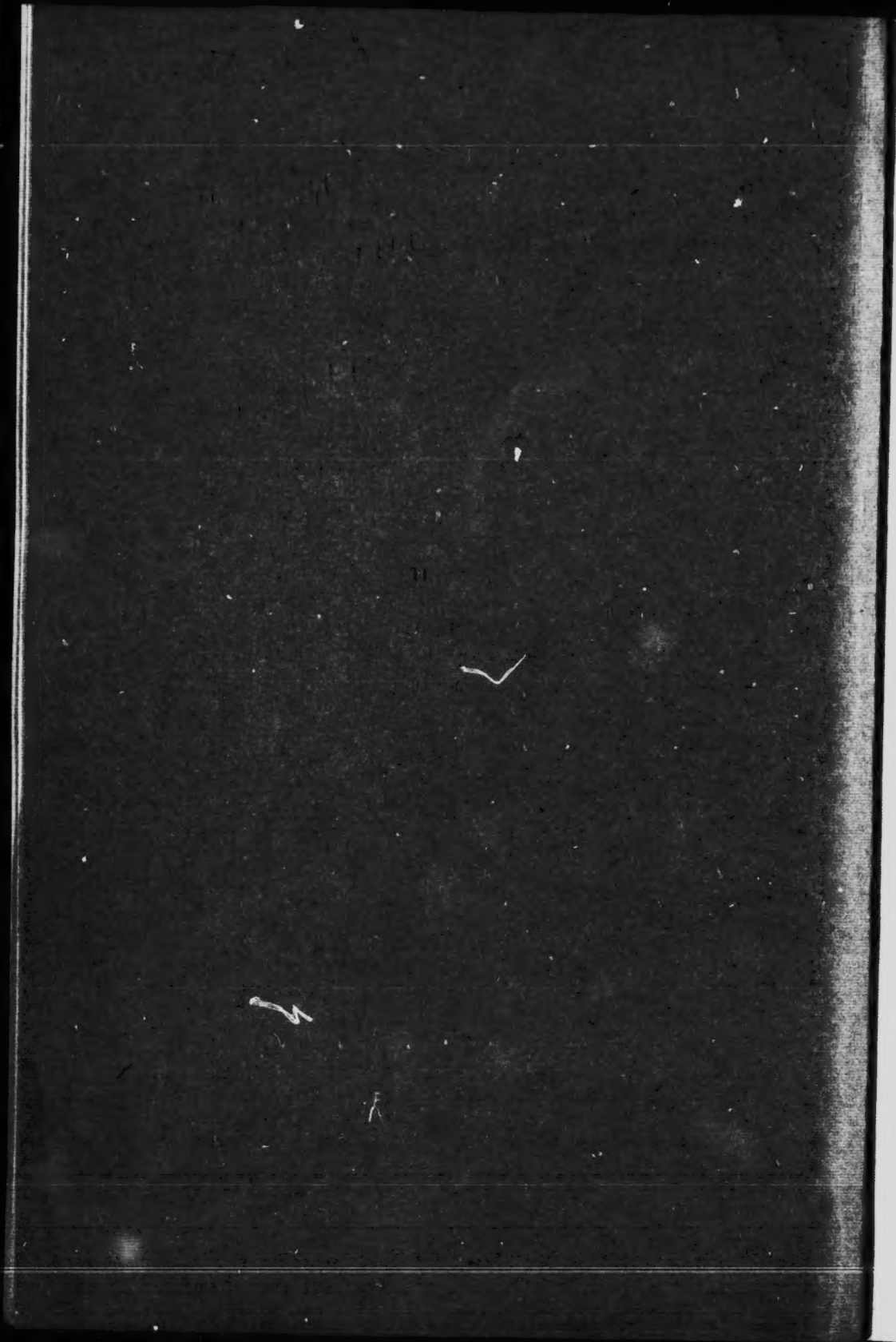
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THE WHITE COMRADE

by Katherine Hale





THE WHITE COMRADE AND OTHER POEMS

BY KATHERINE HALE, *Journal.*
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THE WHITE COMRADE

THE WHITE COMRADE

A Canadian soldier, wounded at Ypres, speaks

So this green land is England! Her we saw
Radiant and smiling in our early dreams,
A land by love dream-haunted. Now we come
With stranger vision than our youth could give
To the great shelter of her mighty arms.
We come from battles bitter and long fought
To see the stars shining on village streets
And watch a country in midsummer calm—
A soft land, lying August-clad but chill,
Dull to Canadian eyes that know the sun
As it stalks red across an azure sky.
And as we limp about and smoke, play cards,
And wait impatient to be off again,
Sometimes we two, amid the comrades here,—
Two only of the three who started out,
For, in the wood at Julien, Edward fell—
Sometimes we two go silent, then look up
To see if we can find in others' eyes
A knowledge that has grown with us from out
The fields of France, when in those awful nights,
Some of us heard a rumor, saw a Form.

Then we look back unto that strange new hour
When time was suddenly transformed for us
Within a sleepy town near old Quebec.

THE WHITE COMRADE

We, sunburned, and already turning home
From a long forest tramp of two good weeks,
We who were friends together, town and school
And lives in common, knitting us akin.
We had been tramping through the distant hills
Far out of reach of papers and of news
And when we stopped for letters, it was there
We met the first surprising note of war:
A little bill-board like a clarion voice
Shouted to us on that midsummer day,
"Germany says!" And on and on and on
The fateful message ran. We turned and stared
Into each other's eyes in blank amaze.
"Germany says!" In two short weeks of time
Hidden by forests as we three had been
Could all the world be humbled so that news
Of Germany, and what she says or does
Or does not say or do, could raise the storm
Whose thunders shook us even from afar.
"Belgium is entered!" "England is prepared!"
"Canada mobilizing!" Oh, ye gods,
What things to read upon a little board
Tacked up above the place where letters lie!

Later, we asked for ours, and they were full
Of a new wonder and a great surprise.
My little sister wrote, "I never dreamed
That things could happen in this prosy town;
But everyone is stirring and awake.

THE WHITE COMRADE

Red Cross is starting, and each girl I know
Has sent for wool. For we must learn to knit."
Then Edward broke his printed envelope:
"Insurance premiums for the risk in war."
The air went chill as at a sudden blast.
Nigel put his away. Nor opened it.
His letters must be read quite out of sight.
To-day I think he did not want to read.
To-morrow he would see her. And the word
Upon all lips would come into their eyes.
We talked with village gossips all day long,
We heard their suppositions, hopes and fears,
We tried to puzzle out those buried weeks,
When, out of sight and sound, such things had come
Upon the world we knew, that it no more
Was our same world. And we, in forest ways
Had been quite lost while it was changing. Strange
Past anything that we had dreamed before!

We climbed the hill behind the little town
And as we sat the gathering darkness fell,
The lights sprang up within the window panes
And some young boy had found a penny flute
Which through the gloaming sounded thin and clear
Like an emphatic fairv note, that called
To all the spirits that could hear its voice
To come and follow, follow where it led.
All here and there that shrill young flute cried
"Come."

THE WHITE COMRADE

And sometimes laughter followed in its train.
We knew that children catching the refrain
Would follow, follow on all luring led
By that young voice through lands of summer night.

In the first bird note of St. Julien
I heard that flute again from hills of home,
When we three sat on that strange August night
And tried to talk and felt our own words fail,
But stared through violet shadows and knew then
That worlds might fall away and new ones dawn,
But never in this world more vital hours
Could come for Canada, or for ourselves
Than these midsummer days when all the land
Must ask a vital question—and reply.

Then we became new soldiers in a cause
That is as old as Christ, the crucified.
As we took drill out in the open air,
Drank the long draughts of ozone keen and bright,
Felt our whole bodies grow as if new-born,
Our minds kept pace and fed on wider thoughts.
Each man I think who was in truth a man,
Felt the old life slip from him in those days
And a new purpose take the place of self.

And so we left Valcartier, and stole out
Across the ocean—that long line of ships,
“The New Armada,” trailing slowly out

THE WHITE COMRADE

Across that bridge of water to the land
Where life and death indeed had met as one.
Where life and death so closely were entwined
You could not tell where one began or ceased.
We did not talk of these things at the time
But each man, as he smoked and shuffled cards,
Or drilled his squad upon the sunny deck,
Each man was conscious through that great good time
That into life a nobler friend had come
To be denied or loved as each one chose.
A strong inevitable friend, so near
That we should touch him in the passing soon:
That young-old friend that life has long named
Death.

At Salisbury we lived and moved in mud.
Talked mud, felt mud, and slept in it knee-deep.
England we felt not. Only lived the day,
And fell at night to leaden dreams of home.

Then France, and sudden springtime bourgeoning.
Oh, bourgeoning indeed with ardent hopes!
I cannot tell you what that change was like:
I wish that words were colours, or were notes,
Then I would go past red to violet tones
To give you back that vibrancy of air,
That selfless, sacrificing, vital mood,
That almost jocund feeling of rebound
Towards the fight for liberty and right

THE WHITE COMRADE

That animated France those first spring days.
The year was young, and in the lovely land
New life was waking ardent, eager-eyed.
The very air called welcome, and we left
Homesickness far behind. We summoned mirth
And whistled down those roads all poplar lined.
We laughed at mud that April winds would dry,
And in that grey square Market Place at . . .
Where we marched past the staff and gave salute
There was baptized a new affinity,
Young Canada with France and England blent.
I tell you hearts beat faster, hopes rode high,
The air was lighter, keener, there was joy,
Great joy in our swift entrance to the fight
That closed about us fast those April days.
I think that never in its hottest hour
Was love so lovely or life so supreme
As in the sudden days of leaf and bud,
Of bird song, and that quickening of the heart
That heralds Great Adventure to the soul.
There was the night we marched on Neuve
Chapelle:
Thousands of shadows in a shadow host.
Beyond lay German legions, and that zone
Invisible, illusive, moving on
That men have called "The Front."
Fancy your heart
Moving with other shadows all that night,
Knowing yourself not flesh at all, but one—

THE WHITE COMRADE

One pulse-beat in the world's great heart of flame.
Perhaps a whistling youth on days of sun,
One among shadows on this night of nights,
Moving with other shadows all night long.
One leaving little loves far, far behind,
One pressing on with thousands of his kind
To answer that great question life had asked
Each one upon his hilltop back at home.

We three marched near together through old France,
Together trenched those days at Neuve Chapelle,
And saw the heavens part and fires descend,
And felt the roar of such a cannonade
As all the world of battles had not known.
The French lay close beside us, and near them
The lithe, brown men from India—heroes they.
We felt like children just discarding toys
In face of those whose souls had long known war,
Whose spirits flashed like rapiers in the face
Of the Great Danger. They were men indeed
Whom it was good to look upon and know,
And in those nights they learned of us to say,
When German flares lit up the evening skies,
"Behold the Northern Lights!" St. Julien came,
And that wild night in which old Edward fell.
Those hours are hard to speak about at all.
They went by like a flash in which we moved
As one man altogether, and the hours
Flared up to heaven like a burning torch.

THE WHITE COMRADE

Nigel and I, one night just after Ypres,
Were struggling with our ancient college-French
Talking, or stumbling into talk, with one
Called René Paule, from an adjacent trench,
Who had been wounded in an early fight.
And he with eloquence and poetry
Like all his vivid race, made haste to tell
Of a strange rumor we had heard before,
How in the depths of plain unvarnished hell
Quivering with anguish so he could not move
And waiting for the stretcher-bearers' call,
He suddenly felt healing, cool and sweet,
As you might feel a fan on a hot day
Swayed by an unseen hand. And softly then
Closing his eyes on blessed, stealing sleep
He felt a touch, and looking up beheld
The kindest, sweetest eyes in all the world.
It was a Comrade in the khaki brown,
His face was tired, but the eyes were keen
And tender as a dewy flower at dawn.
And René, feeling once again the pain,
Gripped the hand tight, and looked into the eyes
For succor, and they held him there, serene,
And slowly, slowly conquered the strong pain.
And René saw the khaki melt away
Until the Comrade seemed all wrapt in white
As though sheer light had woven a robe for him,
And his strong eyes gleamed like an azure flame,
And he held René through the bitter night,

THE WHITE COMRADE

Until the stretcher-bearers came at dawn.
"So the White Comrade often comes, my friends,"
He said to us, and smiling, mused awhile.
"These fields are not so difficult in death;
Whether we live or die it all seems one.
He has come back to us because we die
As He did, long ago, for love of man."

Often we talked of Edward, and he seemed
To march beside us down the bright French roads.
We moved into the firing line once more.
So close the German lines, there only lay
An orchard, in the loveliness of May,
Between us and the armies of the Huns.

Sometimes I think that Festubert will hold
Rank equal with St. Julien, for those
Who lived through its abandonment of fire.
It was the Gunners' day. We had to shell
Those trenches that were fortresses indeed,
And pouring hell's own native thunder out.
The orchard lay between us, and it seemed
We simply had to take that place by storm.
They tried to ditch us with their hedge of wire;
We plunged and made for gaps, and all the while
They rained on us artillery fire, until
Ear drums were stilled and nerves quite ceased to
work;
Machine gun, shrapnel, rifle-fire as one

THE WHITE COMRADE

Kept up the deadly dance of death. And we
Dashed at them, through that dance, till hand to hand
We cleared our orchard, or they say we did.
It was the Gunners' Day. I know that much.
Some of the fun I missed, for at the height,
Just when is lost completely every thought
Of one's own entity, or reason why
It is not, after all, good sport to die
In such a whirlwind of emotion,—then,
Out of a little puff of air it came,
The one shot meant for me.

I fell inert
And sank into unconsciousness, till one
Dragging me off made torture of my wound,
Then left me under some small spreading shrubs.
Surely one needed shelter from the sun
And hottest air that ever poured on pain.
I longed for water, looked for human aid,
But no one came. Only the roar of guns
And a far distant sound that meant the play
Of men in action, that and drilling pain
Met in a hideous duet of war.
I called to Nigel with my aching mind
And knew it was in vain. Again I called
To youth, and to some Force in other worlds
That might put me to death or ease my pain.
A thousand swords were running through my brain,
The blood thumped like an engine in my head.
If I should faint the Comrade White might come!

THE WHITE COMRADE

Only in dreams, in dying dreams of pain
He comes, I thought. Or else it is quite vain
To trust such fairy tales as René told.
Oh, for a glass of water! It was noon
And o'er the grassy plain the sleepy hum
Of insects, moving in a drowsy swoon,
Sang to me through my pain, as if they were
A near vibration of the guns of war.

"War, war, O hot and hideous and hard,
The ways you lead, the deaths you make one die!
I have died fifty times this noon!" So ran
The anguished brain within me, on and on,
All the long way of quivering mortal woe.
The world was gone. I, swooning, felt it go,
Was at the point of nothingness, when there,
Moving across the grass on hands and knees,
I saw a brown-clad figure crawling slow
As if he were a part of the hot plain,
And wondered if I'd last until he came.

Never that troop of angels in the air
At Mons showed brighter wings or lovelier light
Than the worn khaki of that Comrade dear.
I felt him bind my wounds with tender touch,
And at his touch the ghosts of pain escaped.
I saw him smile above me, and I swooned
For joy of waking up not all alone.
I begged "Stay with me till they come!" and then

THE WHITE COMRADE

Looked up into his face for the first time
And saw it was old Edward who had died
At Julien. We left him lying there
White in the moonlight as we all rushed on.
We buried him, Edward the loved and brave,
And now I stared through pain and saw his face.
I saw his eyes, shining and lit with love:
The old eyes, staunch and loyal as they were
All through our youth together, and these days
Of the great camaraderie of war.

"Edward," I murmured, and he only smiled
And waved across the grass right at the guns
Whose thunder sounded fainter in my ears.
"How did you come?" I asked him, as I held
Tight to his hand, that big brown hand of his.
Oh, it was good to die and have him back!
For I had died. That was quite clear to me.
He only said, "The pain will go, old chap!"
Just the same voice, with the accustomed burr
Of his Scotch father sounding through its tones.
And we sat silent in the burning noon.

Then in the distance two small figures moved,
A third behind them, and I knew the boys
Bearing the stretchers were quite close at hand,
And Edward waved them so they came on fast.
To have him leave me! That were a new death
And something told me that he could not stay.

THE WHITE COMRADE

"I long to die, just now, before they come!"
This I told Edward with what strength I had.
And he laughed softly, and I held his hand,
Looked at him long, until the blinding noon
Came to bend down between us, and his face,
Tender and brown and kindly, seemed enwrapt
In a white light, mysterious and strong,
Turning the khaki silver. And the hand
Holding me fast was part of the great light.

I closed my eyes. And now the boys had come,
Lifted me up, taken me quite away
To a camp hospital where Nigel lay
Wounded as I was, out of all vain hope
Of further fighting for a long half year.

The stretcher-bearers story? It was this:
That a strange glow had rested on the shrubs
'Neath which I lay—just a broad patch of light
To show there was a human being there
In need of human aid. And so they came.
"You were half gone, my friend," they said to me,
"It was a wonder that we saw you there!
Strange that the sun so centred on that spot!"
And Nigel, when I told him, said "I think
You were mistaken, but I dare not say
What is revealed to any man these days.
You know the angels that appeared at Mons!
Many have seen bright angels on the field.

THE WHITE COMRADE

I have not seen, but then my eyes are dim,
My vision turns back home so constantly.
If I were dying I should think of her,
She is my Christ, my angel and my hope.
Before each battle I make prayers to her,
And so the earthly love is still my goal.
There are two Comrades, Love and Loneliness,
Perhaps Christ enters when we touch the last.
Loneliness waiteth long, until we give
The last glad hold we have on life, and I—
I have not given yet my hold on life."

And now in this green England that we saw
Radiant and smiling in our early dreams,
We two are marking time, looking at hills
And these small village streets, and playing cards
And telling yarns, and idling in the sun.
And as we limp about and wait, sing songs,
Exchange the tales of trench and hot assault
And hear again the whistling shrapnel call,
Muse in the firelight, laugh at old alarms,
And wait impatient to be off again,
Sometimes we two, amid the comrades here,
Sometimes we two go silent. Then look up
To see if we can find in others' eyes
A knowledge that has grown with us from out
The fields of France, when in those awful nights
Some of us heard a rumor, saw a Form.

And so, my friends, this word I bring to you

THE WHITE COMRADE

Hot from the hell of conflict whence I come,
Where life and death, binding men's spirits close,
Have sealed a certain knowledge on our souls.
Christ has come back to earth in these great days,
I, but a young Canadian, tell you this.
The stories of our battles,—Neuve Chapelle,
St. Julien, Festubert, and all the rest—
They have been told already scores of times,
Sung, written, painted, burned in words of flame.
My words are homely as a tallow dip,
As crude as that, but just as stoutly true.
Christ has come back to earth in these great days
He has come back, as in the centuries past
He suddenly appeared upon the streets
Of old Judean towns. Let people talk
Of ancient creeds and dogmas as they will,
That helps not, hinders not, the vital truth
That one young man in his most ardent youth
So loved life, felt life, understood its laws,
So took pain to his heart, so took great love,
And knew that pain and love are always one,
And knew that death can be lived through to life,
Till he commanded death, and death obeyed.

So comes the Comrade White, down silent pain.
He comes to woods and battlefields to-day,
(Sometimes I think he loves the woods the best)
And finds free souls flung skyward, glad to go.
Among the lonely and the pain-racked ones

THE WHITE COMRADE

He comes—not death at all, but radiant life,
Comes in the eyes of comrades, lives in hearts
That give all, taking nothing in return.
He is a rumor and a far white light,
He is the singing bird, the children's flute
That called us wooing forth to give our all.
The floating glad things of the buoyant air,
Young earth's warm children, music and delight,
Live in His eyes: those deathless azure eyes,
That smile upon the moment we thought hard,
And turn our sacrifice to kindling light.
They pass through radiant gates on whom He smiles.

THE AWAKENING

THE AWAKENING

How like a giant stretching in the sun,
We have slept through the ages; even we
Whom the gods moulded for a people free,
And made tremendous for the race not run.

See we have slept a magic cycle round,
And in the dream we have imagined much;
Felt the soft wings of years we did not touch,
Dallied with somnolence that deadens sound.

With untried strength what we have done is done.
The wandering, drowsy brain has vaguely stirred,
As though from out infinitude it heard
A great voice speaking from behind the sun.

Closer and clear the calling, strangely loud,
And the great country, rousing from long sleep
Murmurs to its own soul, as deep to deep
Beckons a day's new dawn, so sure and proud.

These were the visions of a passing night,
Visions now caught in bugle notes of flame,
*And lo, through storms of war we hear our name
Called by an angel, terrible and bright.*

THE HEARTS OF MOTHERS

THE HEARTS OF MOTHERS

The hearts of mothers are hid things
In these the days of woe,
And troops of strange thoughts move therein
Silently to and fro.

They are not thoughts of yester-year,
Or thoughts of you and me
And that which we have done, or do,
By air, or land, or sea.

But these are thoughts steel-bright with pain,
And death-thoughts bare and stark,
And shining thoughts of armaments
That glitter through the dark.

They move, old passions and revolts,
Fresh-called, yet stiff with scars,
To music crimsoned with the clash
Of endless ancient wars.

And those who summon memories
From pathways of the sun,
When death spoke life most solemnly
Ere new life was begun,

They dream of a strange blooming
That dawns in greater birth:
The frail, bright flower of selflessness
Brought back again to earth.

They feel, the Givers of all Life,
Great need to give again
The utmost dower of womanhood,
All mystery—all pain.

SOUL OF THE EARTH

I saw a tired soldier vainly searching
For room to bury deeply the new dead.
"The old dead they are there, forever perching
About the space we need," he grimly said.
"The old dead, slaughtered, just beneath the sod
Of Earth that once was well-beloved of God."

I heard a woman desperate in her wooing
Of empty space and echoing aisles of air,
Calling upon the gods of her undoing
To stem the fearful flood of her despair.
"Somewhere in France he lies so deep," she said.
"That Earth must make me answer for my dead."

And all the while a wondrous bloom was springing
Above the fields where lie these broken boys,
Thousands of souls like butterflies upwinging
In troop on radiant troop of shining joys.
Host upon host they seek eternal breath
Above the little mounds of lonely death.

"Thus," saith the Earth, "my poppies pass in splen-
dor,
Flame of young hearts, for still my world is young,
And in great Ages, wise because more tender,
The passion of their passing shall be sung.
Ask of these Ages! For the soul of me
Knows endless blooming—vivid, changing, free."

I USED TO WEAR A GOWN OF GREEN

I USED TO WEAR A GOWN OF GREEN

I used to wear a gown of green
And sing a song to May,
When apple blossoms starred the stream
And Spring came up the way.

I used to run along with Love
By lanes the world forgets,
To find in an enchanted wood
The first frail violets.

And ever 'mid the fairy blooms
And murmur of the stream,
We used to hear the pipes of Pan
Call softly through our dream.

But now, in outcry vast, that tune
Fades like some little star
Lost in an anguished judgment day
And scarlet flames of war.

What can it mean that Spring returns
And purple violets bloom,
Save that some gypsy flower may stray
Beside his nameless tomb!

To pagan Earth her gown of green,
Her elfin song to May—
*With all my soul I must go on
Into the scarlet day.*

THE DEPARTURE

THE DEPARTURE

"We watched the boys march singing through the streets of Kingston. We cheered to them and waved to them as the train pulled out."

CONINGSBY DAWSON,
in "*The Passing of the 34th.*"

How you passed out singing on that winter day!
All the air was ringing with your laughter gay;
With the song and banter that made light the way.
There were few sighs wasted on dividing years,
There was mirth and music, kisses, hopes and fears,
Cigarettes and banners, chocolates, socks and tears.
Swifter than your passing did the fancy run,
Soldiers, horses, bayonets—how you all seemed one,
Flashing through the snowflakes and the veiled sun;
Every woman cheered you, some few women wept,
Graybeards longed to join you, peaceful babies slept;
But the land that bore you her own counsel kept.
Only, through the snowflakes sped a rift of light,
Keen as pointed sword-blade and intensely bright—
Like the Lord's hand resting on the ranks of right.
And our hearts would send you, as a song of spring,
Unforgotten echoes of the songs you sing,
And the hope and courage that the new days bring.
Here's our love and greeting from the old home
town;
Here's to speedy meeting, and to your renown;
Here's to every gallant heart in the khaki brown!

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